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CORD MEYER

Vultures circle over Sudan

Reagan officials and State Department experts are beginning to realize that the United States faces "a major challenge" in the growing political and economic crisis in the Sudan. But the Congress hasn't wakened yet to what may be at stake.

If things go badly wrong for the well-intentioned, 15-member Transitional Military Council in Khartoum that seized power last April from Gaafar Nimeiri, the big winners will be Col. Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, and, in the background, Mikhail Gorbachev.

In this struggle for influence in a country that lies strategically placed between Libya and Ethiopia and controls Egypt's access to the waters of the Nile, the United States enjoys certain advantages from the sheer size of its economic aid and the massive nature of its famine relief. With one out of six Sudanese now being fed by America, even the most radical leaders hesitate at this time to advocate a break in relations with the United States.

But the large American aid program is not an unmixed blessing. During the last few years of Mr. Nimeiri's erratic rule, U.S. aid was held responsible for keeping his corrupt dictatorship in business. Both the United States and Egypt are blamed for tolerating Mr. Nimeiri's excesses for too long.

As the faction-ridden military council tries desperately to cope with the civil war in the south and the famine in the west, Libya and Ethiopia are pursuing their separate agendas inside the Sudan. They may have more access to the levers of power in a fast-breaking revolution-

ary situation than does the United States.

In a bold gamble, Col. Qaddafi responded immediately to the overthrow of his sworn enemy, Mr. Nimeiri, by rushing to recognize the new military junta and by promising oil and military assistance. The chairman of the military council, Gen. Swar el Dahab, has tried to reassure a startled State Department that the new military agreement with Libya covers only training and replacement parts.

But, in fact, Col. Qaddafi already has fundamentally changed the relationship between Libya and the Sudan.

As one of Col. Qaddafi's most determined opponents, Mr. Nimeiri had not only broken relations with him but had assisted Libyan exiles in setting up radio transmitters near Khartoum that chipped away effectively at Col. Qaddafi's reputation among his own people. Now the exile broadcasts have been stopped, and, for Col. Qaddafi, Sudan has been transformed from a threat into an opportunity.

As usual, Col. Qaddafi is operating on two levels in his attempt to expand his influence. On the official level, he has responded positively to Sudan's plea that he reduce his arms support for the black, southern revolt of Col. John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army. By reducing his subsidy to Col. Garang's rebellion, Col. Qaddafi has won the grateful appreciation of the military council.

On the covert level, Col. Qaddafi has been very busy exploiting the revolutionary possibilities of the confused political scene in Khartoum, where more than 30 political parties have sprouted to replace Mr. Nimeiri's one-party dictatorship. With elections scheduled for next April, Col. Qaddafi is pouring in agents and funds to build up his network of "Sudanese Revolutionary Committees" and to subsidize every radical fundamentalist organization.

Although Ethiopia's Marxist President Mengistu has no similar ability to influence the seething politics of Khartoum, he does have decisive leverage in the fact that Ethiopian asylum, money, and arms now are essential to Col. Garang's ability to wage the southern civil war. So long as Mr. Mengistu continues to help the Sudan People's Liberation Army, there is no way that Khartoum can win the war or reopen the southern oil fields.

So far, Mr. Mengistu has refused to meet with the emissaries the military council has sent to him. Clearly, both Mr. Mengistu and Col. Garang are waiting for another turn of the revolutionary wheel in Khartoum to bring to power a more radical junta

of young officers, as the SPLA radio continuously exhorts.

Behind the scenes, the Soviets have a covert role in the further radicalization of the revolution through their control over the Sudan Communist Party. Though small, it is the best disciplined and organized communist party in Africa, and through its strength among the railroad workers it has a big influence over the Sudanese labor movement.

When asked what might be the consequences of a radical lurch to the left in the Sudan, a top Pentagon official warned, "Egypt would be surrounded on three sides, and the Red Sea would become a disaster area with the Saudis squeezed between Iran and Qaddafi."

Faced with these consequences of a possible worst-case scenario, the Reagan administration is beginning to give the Sudan the attention it deserves. Close cooperation with the Egyptians has been established, and with enough American assistance the moderate elements that exist within the Sudanese leadership may yet be able to stabilize the situation.